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Against the United States, 1921-45

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A dismal record

Japanese Army Intelligence Activities Against The United States, 1921-45

Stephen C. Mercado

The record of Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) intelligence operations against the United States from about the opening of the Washington Conference in 1921 until Japan's surrender in 1945 is largely one of failure. Before Pearl Harbor, the Army generally neglected a hypothetical enemy, concentrating instead on the Soviet Union and China as its primary threats and Germany as its model. Military education before the war produced few officers knowledgeable about the United States. Moreover, Army officers tended to discount intelligence on US capabilities gained before the war.

The IJA thus entered the war against the United States ill prepared both at the level of the Army General Staff (AGS) and in the field. AGS 2nd Bureau (Intelligence) lacked a substantial analytic capability against the United States until late 1943. In its collection efforts, the IJA suffered from the loss of its spy network in the United States and its meager success in breaking encrypted US military communications. Contempt for the United States and a general "operations first" mentality that slighted intelligence combined with a readiness to believe unsubstantiated battlefield reporting and poor coordination with the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) to produce disasters, perhaps most spectacularly in the Philippines, where the AGS directed a ruinous defense of Leyte that hastened the loss of Luzon and the subsequent invasion of Okinawa.¹

Neglecting a Potential Adversary

The opening in November 1921 of the Washington Conference for disarmament marked a turning point for the IJA.² The high command before then had regarded only the Soviet Union as its hypothetical enemy. Following the Washington Conference, however, Japan

added the United States to its list of potential adversaries. The IJA duly responded by designating three divisions for an invasion of the Philippines in the event of hostilities.³ But Army officers continued to focus their attention on the Soviet Union, concentrating in particular on turning Manchuria into a first line of defense.⁴

Army training reflected its intelligence priorities. Most cadets entered the IJA's Military Academy from military preparatory schools, where Russian, German, and French were the only foreign languages taught. Only a few cadets among the minority that entered the academy from high schools, where English was taught, pursued the language as a special subject. Moreover, many IJA officers then gained further experience in the Soviet Union and Germany by serving as military attachés or taking study tours.⁵ Many Japanese officers who came in contact with Germany became convinced of German military prowess.

Following Japan's entry into an undeclared war against China in 1937, the IJA took concrete action that appeared to recognize the United States as a potential problem, offering English as one of the languages for students at the Nakano School for intelligence officers established in 1938. Even so, few of the school's graduates before Pearl Harbor studied English or received subsequent overseas assignments targeting the United States.

Contempt for the United States contrasted sharply with the IJA's fascination with Germany. One of the key Army officers responsible for creating the puppet state of Manchukuo once rejected an American officer's suggestion that he visit the United States on his way home from two years' study in Germany by saying that he

would go there only as part of an occupation force. In such an atmosphere, what few Army experts there were on the United States were kept from rising to the IJA's key positions.

The preponderant influence of pro-German officers versus the presence of only four or five experts on the United States or Great Britain holding positions higher than section chief in the War Ministry and AGS reportedly increased the high command's "disdain" for the United States. The expectation that Washington would forsake London in the face of Hitler's juggernaut in 1940 then contributed to Tokyo's decision to join Berlin and Rome in the Tripartite Pact that year and declare war against Washington the next.⁶

Prewar Intelligence Activities

The IJA, despite its contempt for the United States as a potential foe, did conduct intelligence-gathering operations on American soil. Successive Army officers in the United States spent years and a considerable sum of money diligently building up a network of spies largely from among the Japanese population. The IJA also monitored US diplomatic and military communications. Within the IJA, the Central Special Intelligence Department (CSID) conducted SIGINT activities under the direct command of the Army chief of staff. The CSID originated in the code research group that the IJA, IJN, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and Communications Ministry established in 1921 in an annex of the MFA's telegram division. From 1936 through December 1941, the CSID was able to decode or surreptitiously read part of US State Department diplomatic traffic.⁷

None of this intelligence activity apparently yielded any information that caused IJA to rethink its views toward the United States. Indeed, Japanese military officers tended to reject as astronomical even the US Government's official industrial production figures. In any case, proud IJA officers tended to denigrate America's spiritual fiber.⁸

One key instance where good intelligence failed to sway the IJA was the reporting of Col. Shinjo Kenkichi. Leaving Yokohama for New York City in March 1940, Shinjo settled in the New York branch of the Japanese

trading company Mitsui & Co. to begin research on the war potential of US industry. With the "valuable" cooperation of more than 50 Japanese companies in New York, he produced by August an outline of his first report.

Shinjo found that the capacity of America's defense industrial base was in the aggregate between 10 to 20 times that of Japan. His findings were disseminated in Tokyo by Maj. Gen. Iwakuro Hideo, who spent the latter half of August briefing senior IJA officers. The information, however, failed to change the course of IJA thinking.⁹

Wartime Army Intelligence

When some 43,000 troops under Lt. Gen. Homma Masaharu launched the first large-scale Army assault on an American position by landing on 22 December 1941 north of Manila at Lingayen Gulf,¹⁰ AGS 2nd Bureau lacked an intelligence staff equal to the task of analyzing reporting on the US military. Its lackluster 6th Section, responsible for analyzing the United States and Great Britain, had emerged by default rather than intention when 2nd Bureau created sections to cover other countries.¹¹ Hori Eizo, who joined 2nd Bureau in November 1943 after graduating from the Imperial War College in December 1942, found himself assigned to the 6th Section's America Group. Col. Sugita Ichiji, promoted after Pearl Harbor from head of the section's America Group to chief of 6th Section, belatedly began building up its analytic capability. From the end of 1942 to the end of 1943, the unit grew from 18 to 65 personnel, including nine staff officers and several Nakano School graduates recalled on account of the war from their overseas insertions in the Americas and India.¹²

Sugita's efforts to develop an analytic capability for the fight against the United States came too late. Hori notes his surprise that a 2nd Bureau section devoted solely to the United States and Great Britain was not established until April 1942, some four months after Pearl Harbor. He describes the emergence under Sugita at the end of 1943 of a substantial 6th Section as "too little, too late." Pointing to Sugita's order that he research US

military tactics, Hori reflects that the Army should have conducted such a survey and incorporated the results into its planning in the 1920s.

Hori also quotes approvingly a postwar reflection by his immediate superior as chief of the 6th Section's America Group that the Army High Command did not refocus its education, training, intelligence gathering, and research from the Soviet Union to the United States until late 1943, when the US counteroffensive had already gained momentum. Second Bureau's focus on the Soviet Union to the neglect of the Pacific resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of soldiers, according to Hori.¹³

Far into the conflict, many AGS officers continued to reflect the Army High Command's longstanding failure to take the United States seriously. Hori heard fellow staff officers as late as November 1943 dismissing successful US invasions of smaller islands by predicting that the US military's lack of peacetime training above the regimental level and the Japanese Army's "incomparable" fighting spirit would result in disaster for US forces coming ashore against large-scale IJA forces. Hori also recounts the visit to the War College of a 2nd Bureau intelligence officer who spoke contemptuously of how, during Homma's invasion of the Philippines, a unit of 15 M-2 tanks retreated from a village near Lingayen Gulf toward Manila after offering only token resistance to a smaller Japanese force of nine tanks. At the War College, Hori learned only of easy victories at Pearl Harbor, the Philippines, and elsewhere; there was no mention of the Japanese reverses at Midway or Guadalcanal.¹⁴

Other Problems

The IJA's intelligence effort also suffered from insufficient reporting from the field. The IJA's loss of its spy network in the continental United States was devastating, according to Hori. Washington's internment of individuals of Japanese descent on the West Coast deprived the IJA of valuable intelligence on ship movements, US industrial trends, aircraft production, and other information. Hori calls the internment a "strategic intelligence victory" for the United States far surpassing Japan's "tactical victory" at Pearl Harbor.¹⁵

In addition, the IJA also suffered from its failure, despite great efforts, to break the higher US military codes after the United States changed the military codes in January 1942. This failure was in sharp contrast to its successes against the Soviet Union and China.

Only late in the war did the codebreakers in CSID have any success. In July 1944, Col. Onodera Makoto, Japan's military attaché in Stockholm and reputed chief of Japanese military intelligence in Europe, obtained an M-209 mechanical encryption device. The CSID began at once to analyze the device, succeeding in August to decode some frontline US military codes.

Col. Nakano Takeshi, who had lead the study of the device, then went to Manila to assist Col. Kudo Katsuhiko, chief of the Southern Army's special intelligence division, in preparing for the anticipated US return. Both men died outside Canton harbor when, accompanying the transfer of Southern Army headquarters from Manila to Saigon during the fighting for Leyte, their ship hit a mine.

Nakano's loss left the CSID's US-British Decryption Research Group rudderless. It was not until May 1945, when two of the group's officers mobilized students of mathematics and foreign languages, that the CSID regained its momentum. Only at the end of the war did the CSID manage to decrypt approximately 80 percent of the US military traffic.¹⁶

The CSID's failure until the final weeks of the war to crack US military codes forced it to rely on traffic analysis. Creating a nationwide SIGINT network and coordinating its activities with its Navy counterparts, the CSID conducted systematic collection and analysis of B-29 bomber communications frequencies and call signs. It then combined the information obtained with direction-finding equipment to track approaching B-29 formations and alert local air defense units. But preparations by the United States to use its newly developed atomic bomb illustrates the limitations of the Army's SIGINT effort. The CSID, through traffic analysis, detected in May 1945 an unconventional B-29 formation and—with increasing anxiety—tracked it through

August without divining its mission. Using its M-209 device, the CSID managed to decode a message referring to America's atomic bomb only on 11 August, two days after the second atomic bomb had fallen on Nagasaki.

Acting on Bad Intelligence

The IJA also blindly accepted wildly inaccurate reporting of Japanese military engagements with the enemy. Hori notes that reports from the Navy General Staff (NGS) of the number of US aircraft carriers reported sunk or severely damaged in a series of engagements during November 1943 off Bougainville and the Gilbert Islands suggested that the US Navy had lost every one of its carriers. Based on the NGS's account, Eighth Area Army Commander Gen. Imanura Hitoshi ordered his 6th Division to counterattack the 1 November US landing at Bougainville; the operation ended in a costly failure. The Japanese military's negligence in devising a system to verify the reports of Japanese pilots returning from battle forced Hori and other 6th Section officers to rely on CSID monitoring of foreign broadcasts from San Francisco and Sidney for more accurate information.¹⁷

Second Bureau also suffered throughout the war from insufficient coordination with its IJN counterpart at IGHQ. Hori indicates that the Army and Navy general staffs, while unified on paper within IGHQ, had in reality been operating independently of each other since the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. Neither general staff would inform the other of its reverses. Immediately after joining AGS, for example, Hori first learned of the Japanese disaster at Midway not from the NGS but from the German military attaché in Tokyo.¹⁸

IJA commanders, possessing an "operations first" mentality, often conducted their operations with little or no regard for the intelligence at hand. Colonel Sugita, chief of 2nd Bureau's 6th Section, viewed AGS's neglect to build up his section until late 1943 as evidence of IGHQ's tendency to slight and ignore intelligence in planning operations. Hori reveals that the AGS ordered the Nanto Detachment at Buna, on Papua New Guinea's north coast, to proceed over the nearly trackless jungle of the forbidding Owen Stanley Range to

attack Port Moresby. According to Hori, the real enemy was the nearly impassable terrain and lack of provisions. Only one in 10 soldiers from the detachment returned to Buna after failing to reach Port Moresby.¹⁹

Nor did operations officers in 1st Bureau show much regard for the intelligence officers in 2nd Bureau. In October 1944, for example, Hori was ordered to fly to Manila to brief his analysis of US military tactics to the 14th Area Army commanders. While operations staff officers had the use of reserved planes at nearby Tachikawa Airfield, Hori had to take a long train ride south to Miyazaki Prefecture's Nyutabaru Airfield.

In another case, when 6th Section's America Group put together its estimate in early 1945 that the United States would initiate the anticipated invasion of the Japanese main islands by landing its main force in Kyushu's Kagoshima Prefecture in the October-November period, only the chiefs of 2nd Bureau and its 6th Section briefed the estimate to 1st Bureau. The members of Hori's America Group did not feel at liberty to enter the operations room.²⁰

Debacle in the Philippines

The IJA's contempt for the United States, an "operations first" mentality that precluded planning in advance, a readiness to accept unsubstantiated reporting of enemy losses, and poor coordination with the IJN led to disaster in the Philippines. IJA commanders neglected to establish an effective intelligence network well in advance of General MacArthur's return. The overseas distribution of intelligence officers from the Nakano School is indicative. Only two Nakano intelligence officers were serving in the Philippines as late as November 1942. Responding late to an accelerating US counteroffensive approaching the Philippines, the IJA attached a total of 98 Nakano graduates to the 14th Area Army only by December 1944, when Japan was losing the battle for Leyte.²¹

The IJA's disdain for the United States and general neglect of intelligence had also left the Army unable to break US military codes until late in the war. In the

three months that Colonel Nakano's group worked with Southern Army cryptologists in Manila, they "completely succeeded" in breaking the "strip coordinate code" of the guerrillas. On the whole, however, it proved only a partial success that came too late. Had IJA obtained the M-209 earlier, Hori reflects, the 14th Army would have had a far better picture of US intentions regarding the Philippines.²²

The odd complacency of AGS staff officers regarding the US counteroffensive also apparently slowed their planning for the defense of the Philippines until it was too late. IGHQ only began in March 1944 drafting plans for a decisive battle in the Philippines into which the IJA would throw nearly all of its resources on the islands against the invaders on the main island of Luzon.

The Army High Command moved to execute its plan by upgrading in August the 14th Army in Manila to the 14th Area Army and placing the 35th Army, which was responsible for Leyte, under its command. IGHQ then transferred Lt. Gen. Yamashita Tomoyuki, called the Tiger of Malaya for his rapid capture of Singapore in 1942, from his command of the 1st Area Army in Manchuria to Manila to take over command of the 14th Area Army.²³

But AGS staff officers, ever ready to underestimate the United States, threw away any chance for sustaining a conventional defense in strength in the Philippines by blindly accepting in mid-October an announcement of a resounding defeat of a US fleet off Taiwan. The NGS later revised its tally downward but neglected to give the new results to the IJA.²⁴ The AGS readily accepted the results. "Drunk" on the reporting, IGHQ hurriedly ordered the decisive battleground shifted from Luzon to Leyte, where the Japanese now planned to contain US forces at the anticipated site of their first landing in the Philippines. The result, in Hori's words, was a "historic blunder of a handful of strategists" in IGHQ that pushed Japan down a steep slope to defeat.²⁵

Hori himself witnessed the disaster unfold. Arriving at Nyutabaru Airfield on 12 October on his way to Manila to brief commanders there on US military tactics, he watched in shock as officers simply tallied on a large board the unsubstantiated claims of pilots returning

from the battle. He cabled the chief of AGS 2nd Bureau that the reporting was unreliable, but his warning went unheeded.²⁶

Arriving in Manila on 15 October, Hori learned that the various staff officers had entirely accepted IGHQ's report of a resounding victory. Hori briefed Lieutenant General Yamashita on 18 October, explaining how erroneous IJN reporting in 1943 had led to the failure to repel an American landing at Bougainville. Yamashita's staff officers, however, continued to believe the false report.

When a scout plane from the 16th Division on Leyte reported on 19 October seeing some 10 US destroyers screening a few battleships, most of them jumped to the conclusion that the force was the survivors from the engagement off Taiwan taking shelter in Leyte Gulf from a storm. Hori countered that frequent US landings in bad weather in the past and the occupation two days earlier of a small island off Leyte were indicators of an imminent US invasion. His arguments fell on deaf ears until the military police called to report that a downed American pilot had revealed under interrogation that 12 US carriers were preparing to invade Leyte.²⁷

The intelligence was accepted too late. Yamashita had already bowed to IGHQ orders by sending the cream of his units to Leyte. IJA commanders in Tokyo completely misread the situation by blindly accepting the IJN report of victory off Taiwan. Thinking that General MacArthur was trapped at Leyte, IGHQ even prepared a victory announcement for release on 3 November.²⁸ Yamashita, stripped of his core units, could no longer hope to fight a decisive battle near Manila. He then deployed his remaining forces for a holding action in the mountains of northern Luzon to tie down MacArthur as long as possible, thereby giving his superiors in Tokyo at least some time to prepare for the defense of the Japanese home Islands.²⁹

If IJA leaders had permitted Yamashita to conserve his limited forces on Luzon rather than throwing them at the last minute into Leyte on the basis of their own prejudices and faulty intelligence, the Tiger of Malaya

would almost certainly have exacted far higher US casualties and pushed back considerably the timetable for the invasion of Okinawa. A prolonged defense could even had led to the atomic bombs, Soviet entry into the war, and Tokyo's surrender without the deaths of some 12,000 US combatants and over 150,000 Japanese military and civilian casualties in the battle for Okinawa.

Notes

1. This article is based on a number of Japanese and American sources. The accounts of two IJA intelligence officers who served in 2nd Bureau are especially useful. Hori Eizo, who worked in AGS 2nd Bureau's America Group and in the Philippines as chief intelligence officer to Lt. Gen. Yamashita Tomoyuki, has written *Daihonei Sanbo No Joho Senki (An IGHQ Staff Officer's Record of Intelligence Warfare)* (Tokyo, Bungei Shunju; 1989). Hayashi Saburo, who headed 2nd Bureau's Soviet section, is the author of *Unofficial History of Army Battles in the Pacific War*. Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten; 1951. In this article, I have drawn on the annotated English version that he and historian Alvin Coox published as *Kogun: The Japanese Army in the Pacific War* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Association Press, 1959). I have put Japanese personal names in the Japanese order, surname followed by given name.
2. Meirion and Susie Harries, *Soldiers of the Sun: The Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army*. (New York, Random House; 1991) p. 133. The Conference resulted in the IJA's giving up its gains in Siberia, Tsingtao, and on the Shantung Peninsula, the IJN bowing to a 6:10:10 ratio regarding the United States and Great Britain in capital ships, and the termination of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance.
3. Iwakuro, Hideo. *Junbi Sareteita Himitsu Sen (Covert Warfare Prepared)*, Shukan Yomiuri, 8 December 1956, p. 21.
4. Hayashi and Coox, p. 7.
5. Spector, Ronald. *Eagle Against the Sun: The American War Against Japan*. (New York, Free Press, 1985) p. 38.
6. Hayashi and Coox, p. 7.
7. Hori, pp. 82-84, 171, 210, 233-34.
8. Hayashi and Coox, p. 23.
9. Iwakuro, pp. 22-23.
10. Karnow, Stanley. *In Our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines*. (New York, Random House; 1989); p. 291.
11. Richelson, Jeffrey. *Foreign Intelligence Organizations*. (Cambridge, Mass., Ballinger Publishing Co., 1988) p. 250, and Hori, pp. 39-43.
12. Hori, pp. 13-14, 49-54, 77.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 49-54, 78, 134.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 30-32, 54.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 171-72, 210-19, 234.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 87-93, 101, 145.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 30-32, 87.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 98.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 135, 223.
21. Nakano Koyukai. (*Society of Friends of the Nakano School*) *Rikugun Nakano Gakko (The Army Nakano School)*, pp. 522-23.
22. Hori, pp. 171-72.
23. Drea, Edward. *MacArthur's ULTRA: Codebreaking and the War Against Japan, 1942-1945*. (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1992) pp. 159-60. Hayashi and Coox, pp. 121-22, 126-27.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 166.
25. Hori pp. 156-57.

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26. *Ibid.*, pp. 135-39.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 141-44, 152-55.
28. Drea, pp. 167-68.
29. Hori, pp. 132, 174, 221.